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## CHAPTER

# 1

# Never Let Your Talent Outrun Your Character

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**W**hen was the last time you truly wondered?

Not searched. Not scrolled. Not skimmed for a quick hit of information.

When was the last time you sat with a question long enough for it to press back on you?

The kind of wondering that slows you down. The kind that doesn't immediately reach for an answer but instead pulls you into the tension of not knowing, and forces you to examine things that are uncomfortable and inconvenient.

We have atrophied that muscle. Why bother not knowing an answer when we have access to every answer in the

palm of our hand? Why wrestle with a hard question when the answer is a tap away?

Access to information isn't the problem. The habit of not examining the things that need examining is.

Because for the hardest questions life and leadership ask, the answers aren't the point.

Who you become through the examining is.

Information can inform us, but it cannot transform us. It cannot decide for us how we respond under pressure, hold the line when things get hard, or steady our minds when they wander into the deep waters of fear, doubt, or uncertainty. Information cannot govern us.

That's the work of character.



I give more than a hundred talks a year, many of them at leadership events hosted by my company, 2Words Character Development. At one of those events, a close friend and athletic director named Charles Ament pushed hard for us to bring in a speaker I had never heard of.

His name was Phil Beckner.

Coach Ament didn't mention it casually. He pressed.

"Mackey," he said, "trust me—Phil's a stud."

Phil works with NBA players, helping them develop the skills that separate good from elite. His résumé included some of the best athletes in the world.

But résumés don't impress me.

A list of accomplishments doesn't tell you much about whether someone can actually teach. I care about one thing:

Can you step in front of a room and make the people there better?

Coach Ament assured me Phil would make every person in the room better, and he was right.

Phil's session was clear, practical, and sharp. He broke things down the way great coaches break down film: simple enough to understand immediately, but layered enough that you could see how it applied in real situations. He shared personal experiences without turning vulnerability into a performance, which is rarer than it should be.

After his talk, I sent him a message with a few observations and some feedback. The way he approached player development felt familiar—like what we try to do with leadership: slow things down enough for people to see what they've been missing.

That message started the relationship and we decided to connect in person.

Phil suggested dinner. His favorite place, he said, was the Cheesecake Factory.

I don't usually have big opinions about chain restaurants, but cheesecake happens to be my favorite dessert, so the decision was simple.

Somewhere between grilled chicken, steamed broccoli, and a slice of caramel cheesecake Phil asked a question that caught me off guard: "If I put you in a room with NBA players," he said, "what would your message be?"

On paper, the answer should have been easy.

I've spent most of my career refining this work: teaching, speaking, challenging young leaders across the country. The message isn't new. I've said it thousands of times.

But at that moment, I hesitated.

I speak primarily to high school athletes. Students. Young leaders who are still becoming who they're going to be. The men Phil works with live in a different world. They're among the most talented, wealthy, and visible athletes on the planet. Kids look up to them. Adults pay to watch them.

And Phil was asking what I would say to them.

For a moment, a quiet thought slipped in, one that didn't need to be loud to be disruptive.

*Who am I to speak to them? I am just "the high school guy."*

Comparison has a way of distorting perspective.



I sat with Phil's question for a moment, turning it over in my mind while the noise of the restaurant filled the space around us.

There's always a temptation in moments like that to reach for something impressive—to say something polished or clever, something that sounds like it belongs in a room full of professional athletes.

But he would have seen right through that, and I knew it.

So instead of searching for something impressive, I gave him the answer I believed in the most.

"I'd tell them the same thing I tell my student athletes every day," I said.

Phil leaned in slightly, waiting.

"Never let your talent outrun your character."

I didn't add anything to it. There wasn't anything to add. It wasn't a speech or a framework, just a simple truth I had seen play out too many times to ignore.

Phil nodded almost immediately.

"That's exactly what they need," he said.

I asked him why.

He leaned back in his chair, thinking for a second before answering.

"So many of these guys have been elite their entire lives," he said. "They've been the best players in every gym they've ever walked into. Talent carried them through high school. Talent carried them through college. And when that happens long enough, nobody ever really forces you to build anything underneath it."

That stayed with me.

The players Phil works with already have everything most people spend their lives chasing: talent, opportunity, resources, access. From the outside, it looks like they have every advantage. But even at that level, there is still a kind of limitation that doesn't show up on stat sheets or highlight reels.

It's not your talent. It's your character.

But exceptional talent has a way of creating exemptions. When someone is good enough, doors continue to open even when other parts of their life are still underdeveloped. Success can arrive before the beliefs and behaviors required to sustain it are fully formed.

Over time, that shapes a person's character.

Phil leaned forward again, almost as if he wanted to make sure I understood the weight of what he was saying.

“Our job isn’t just to help them win games,” he said. “It’s to help them win in life. That means helping them develop the kind of edge that lasts after talent evens out.”

In life and leadership, your talent is your floor and your character is your ceiling.

Talent opens doors. It creates opportunities. In the early stages, it can feel like the deciding factor—the differences are obvious: One person is faster, sharper, more naturally gifted than everyone else in the room.

But the longer the game goes, the more those differences begin to fade. Other people improve. Experience accumulates. The room gets better. And when that happens, the question changes. It is no longer about who has the most talent; it becomes about who has built the character to sustain what talent started.

That is when people separate.

Not at the beginning—when talent is most visible—but later, when it is no longer enough to carry the weight by itself.

Talent can take you a long way, but it was never meant to carry you the whole way.



What that conversation clarified wasn’t merely a speech topic for NBA players. It gave language to a clear pattern.

Most of us are introduced to the idea of character early in life. Parents try to anchor it at home. Teachers repeat it in classrooms. Coaches reinforce it in locker rooms. For a time, those lessons were foundational.

But somewhere along the way, something shifts.

As we grow older, character slowly moves from the center of our development to the margins. It remains part of the language we use—printed on posters, referenced in mission statements—but it rarely stays at the center of what we pursue. When decisions are made, when performance is evaluated, when outcomes are measured, and when it's time to solve problems, the focus shifts to talent.

In reality, many of the most persistent leadership challenges are not talent problems at all.

They're character problems.

A team may be talented but lack trust. A leader may have charisma but resist feedback. A high performer may excel when conditions are ideal but unravel when pressure rises.

The issue isn't what they can do. It's who they've become because of what they believe.

*As long as I can keep getting better . . . everything else will take care of itself.*

And for a while, that belief system works.



The challenge of this book is this: Instead of asking how far your talent can take you, ask yourself, *Do I have a strong enough character to sustain me as I grow?*

That question changes what you pay attention to. It shifts the focus away from what is most visible and toward what is foundational.

Because over time, talent will level out. The longer you do whatever it is you do in life, the closer you will get to the

point where everyone is talented. When the margins of difference narrow—when the pressure increases, when the easy advantages begin to fade—what separates you from others won't just be who has better talent.

It will be who has a stronger character.

Once you see it, it's hard to unsee.

You begin to notice it in the teammate who performs well until something challenges their role. In the leader who is confident until they are questioned. In the organization that looks strong until pressure exposes what hasn't been tested.

And if you're willing, you'll begin to notice it in yourself.

The once quiet moments when your response didn't match your intention or you allowed your standards to slip will get uncomfortably loud. The small gaps between the belief you proclaimed and the character your actions revealed will look wider than the Grand Canyon.



Which brings me back to wondering, *I wonder what you will do when you notice?*

Will you jump to your phone and search up the right information or the answer to the question “What do I need to do next?”

Or will you slow down long enough to get brutally honest with yourself about how you are doing on the Seven Pressure Tests life gives you? When the pressures of adversity, uncertainty, identity, truth, mastery, support,

and purpose show up in your life—and they will—would you be willing to slow down and examine:

*What do I really believe about this?*

*What belief-driven actions have become patterns in my life?*

*What do my patterns tell me about the truth of my character?*

And maybe most important:

*Is my character strong enough to carry me through life's hardest moments?*

That is the ultimate question that the seven uncommon beliefs of this book will examine. I call them *uncommon beliefs* because they are, to be on the nose about it, so uncommon.

They take the default beliefs of those who put talent first and flip them on their heads. They each demand that you consider a different scoreboard. When these beliefs are examined, and allowed to grow into the patterns that shape the truth of who you are, they work together to produce a competitive advantage that can't be taken from you: your character.

## The Seven Uncommon Beliefs

- **Hard isn't bad.** I am not a victim of adversity. I will get knocked down but I will always get back up—grateful, stronger, and smarter because of it.

- **Optimism requires no evidence.** I choose optimism—not because the outcome is certain, but because certainty was never mine to control. Who I am becoming is more important than what happens.
- **I am not my performance.** I refuse to allow something that can be taken from me to be my foundation. I will daily pursue the examined life.
- **The truth is not my enemy.** I will always receive hard truths, have hard conversations, and pursue the truth—even when it is uncomfortable.
- **Mastery is not the destination.** I refuse to arrive. I will always strive to be better today than I was yesterday—because I am worth that work.
- **I don't have to do it alone.** Independence is not strength. Asking for help is not a sign that something is wrong with me—it's how I show my strength.
- **It's not about me.** I refuse to live or lead in a tit-for-tat system—I don't keep score. I freely give the best of me to whoever is in front of me. Always.